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ConTeNtS

INTRODUCTION

TO ADAPT an Indonesian proverb: "If Pramoedya Ananta Toer is our right eye, then Danarto is our left". Both are crucial to a proper reading of contemporary Indonesian prose. Both are very different in what they have written about and how they have written.

Born in East Java in 1925, Pramoedya has studied and written about all the major themes of Indonesian nationhood, many of which he has directly experienced himself. His first novel, *Perburuan* (The Fugitive, 1950) was written while he was a prisoner of war during the Indonesian Revolution. It tells the story of a failed local rebellion against the Japanese Armed Forces at the very end of the Second World War. His other early works include *Keluarga Gerilya* (The Family of a Guerilla, 1950) and *Cerita dari Blora* (Stories from Blora, 1952). *Cerita dari Blora* is a series of stories about himself and of other individuals living in the poor coastal region where he was raised. *Keluarga Gerilya* is an epic work that describes the sufferings of one family during three days of the Indonesian Revolution. Both works champion the ideals for which the Revolution was fought, in particular social justice and the desire for a decent living standard for ordinary people.

His works of the fifties suggest that these ideals were immediately betrayed by the new Republic. *Bukan Pasar Malam* (No Night Carnival, 1951) is typical of this rapid disillusionment at the petty struggles for political power and the widespread poverty which followed the end of the armed struggle for independence from Dutch colonialism. A later work, *Gadis Pantai* (The Girl from the Coast, 1962-5), also develops an extended criticism of the deeply degrading exploitation of the common people. In this work, the blame for this situation is directed towards the feudal social elite and the religious leaders of Java.

Pramoedya's political commitment to the literary left during the "Guided Democracy" period of High Sukarnoism (1959-1965), led to his imprisonment in 1966 by the "New Order" government of President Suharto. On the island of Buru where he was detained until 1979, he wrote a series of four novels that dealt with the rise of the Indonesian nationalist movement during the early twentieth century. Despite the distant time frame employed, the novels have been seen by many as part of the struggle to maintain the integrity of his vision of a just and independent Indonesia against the materialism and authoritarianism of the New Order regime.

Pramoedya's work falls, from the very beginning, into the realist tradition. The plots are clear and simple. His characters are recognisable individuals. They live in a clearly defined secular world. His themes are the grand themes of the twentieth century: modernity, nationalism, and human freedom. The works have been long admired in Indonesia, although banned under Suharto, and extensively praised by foreign critics. The Dutch professor A. Teeuw considers Pramoedya "Indonesia's greatest modern prose-writer"[1]. Critic Anthony Johns, has stated: "his technique as a story-teller is superb; his style is characterised by a striking immediacy, and he has a unique power to create an atmosphere of intense emotional stress when he confronts his characters with the (to him) profoundest problems of the human condition"[2].

Perhaps as a consequence of the power of his writing and the accessibility of his work, Pramoedya has been extensively translated into English, Dutch, French, Russian and Chinese for almost four decades. After the isolated publication of a few translations of various short stories, in specialised academic journals, including "No Night Carnival" in 1973[3], *Perburuan* was translated into English as *The Fugitive* in 1975[4]. A selection of stories from his *Cerita dari Blora*, together with a different translation of "No Night Carnival", appeared in the same year under the title of *A Heap of Ashes*.[5]

It was, however, the translations of his works written on Buru brought him to the attention of readers worldwide and recognised the status of Pramoedya as a "prisoner of conscience" which Amnesty International had argued for two decades. The first of the so-called "Buru Quartet", *Bumi Manusia*, was published in an English translation by Max Lane in 1981 as *This Earth of Mankind*, and the rest of the series followed over the next ten years[6]. Pramoedya's prison note-books, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* (The Mute's Soliloquy, 1995-7), were published in New York in 1999,[7] and somewhat earlier, in a more extensive form in Dutch. In 1999, an American translation of *Cerita dari Jakarta* (Stories from Jakarta, 1963) also appeared and was almost immediately republished in Jakarta.[8]

The American social theorist Fredric Jameson has argued in an self-admittedly over-generalised essay, "Third-world literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", that all third-world texts are "national allegories", in which "the story of the private individual destiny is always the allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society."[9]. Pramoedya's determinedly democratic idealism, and his lengthy periods in prison, have led to an image, as the blurbs to the English translations of the Buru novels have it, that Pramoedya is "Indonesia's Solzhenitsyn", the martyred voice of conscience and the champion of his own people against a repressive non-democratic government. In recognition of his literary achievement and personal courage throughout his interment, Pramoedya received generous public honours at the end of this decade, particularly in Europe, Japan, The Philippines and the United States.

Despite his being Indonesian, Pramoedya comes to the English reader, so to speak, "already read". He fits into known literary and political categories, which set him in heroic relief against a regime of which one already disapproves and a society of which it is not necessary to know a great deal.

Danarto in English translation has none of the advantages of Pramoedya. He has not been a political activist. He is not a realist. The book offered here is alien in the extreme and cannot be pre-read. It requires a certain determination to understand what Danarto is doing because his work is emphatically non-realist, set in the realm of culturally specific fantasy. The rewards, it must be immediately added, for making this effort, are enormous.

Abracadabra is a translation of Danarto's first collection of short stories, *Godlob*, originally published in 1975. They represent the foundation of his later development and are, in my opinion, his work in its purest and best form. The stories defy western logic and morality. The Indonesian social scientist Arief Budiman has described Danarto's work as apparently written "in a state of trance, and not in a fully conscious condition in which he was in control of himself and aware of the direction in which he was proceeding."[10]

They reject the violent social order that has prevailed pretty much throughout Danarto's life. Danarto was born in Sragen, central Java, in 1940, and the horrors of the Japanese Occupation and the Revolution made a deep impression on him as a child, as the "Autobiography" specially prepared for this particular volume bear witness. The impact on him of the violence of the massacre of the Communist Party of Indonesia in late 1965 – early 1966 was equally profound. The Indonesian poet Abdul Hadi has applauded Danarto for "successfully finding a new language to express the mystical thoughts and feelings of a human being in revolt against an existing order of values, and struggling to enter a new set of values." Like Arief Budiman, Abdul Hadi also argues that Danarto depicts his inner experiences in a manner that is "profoundly cinematic, forceful, horrifying, properly confused, and surrealistic."[11]

The stories are profoundly religious, in a rather unorthodox way. Danarto himself has claimed that the starting-point for all his creative work is pantheism, the doctrine that all nature is pervaded by God and that we can all become God.[12] There is a certain ambivalence in his writing about the actual existence of God, but as he notes in "Asmaradâna", even if God does not exist, He can still be conceived of as the highest possible stage of the evolutionary process.

The soul, possibly, evolves. Danarto asserts this in one story, "Love Charm", and also denies it at the same time. It evolves from mineral to vegetable life, then into humanity, after countless births and rebirths. In this sense, "animals are eternal, plants are eternal."[13] The goal is, however, to pass from human life into complete absorption into God, or nature, as happens to the legendary figure of the *wayang* shadow theatre Abimanyu in "Nostalgia" and the pregnant beggar woman in "Love Charm". Thus, the greatest individual is the person who can "completely vanish from history."[14] These apparently Hindu ideas were long ago accepted into the indigenous Javanese world-view but they can also be arguably found in the work of the great Muslim mystic and theologian Ibn Al-Arabi. Certainly there are many references in *Abracadabra* to a belief in Allah and His prophets, beginning with Adam and passing down through Abraham, Moses, Jesus and others down to the last and greatest prophet, Muhammad.

As fantasies, the stories have all the concrete reality, violence, obscenity, strange associations and childishness that one associates with dreams. The characters, sometimes, are figures that Indonesian readers might just be expected to recognise. Some, like Abimanyu, are part of the Javanese shadow theatre, which has derived its stories and major characters from the Indian complex of legends, the *Mahabharata*. Others, such as Bekakrakan and the beautiful but cruel mother of "Armageddon", and "Rintrik" of the story which here bears her name, are his own creation but resemble nevertheless figures of Indonesian and Malay folklore. Still others derive from non-Indonesian literary sources. Salome Sweetseventeen, in "Asmaradana" comes from the biblical tradition. Ahasveros, the Wandering Jew, cursed to travel the world and never die because he refused to help Christ on the journey to the crucifixion, who is the

central character in "Labyrinth", comes from medieval European legend. In two stories, "Play Within A Play" and "Abracadabra", there are even characters from Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*, drawn from Danarto's reading of the Indonesian translation by Trisno Sumarjo, first published in 1950.

Danarto takes these characters and weaves new stories around them, covering the gaps not dealt with in the original stories. For English readers, even the small bits of familiarity they can grasp are still condemned to change shape and vanish. Most of the characters, in fact, die cruel deaths. Some die in war. The terrible logic of war requires that a man be dead before he can be considered a hero. This, as a number of stories (including the first, "Godlob") shows, is a logic that men can accept and women cannot. In Danarto's stories, the men are fierce and cruel. The women are gentle and loving, and equally condemned to suffer. The gender stereotypes are no longer ones which readers readily accept, but neither are they consistently applied.

Virtually all of the characters reveal the purpose of their lives through their strange origins and harsh deaths. This too is a profoundly Javanese concern. The scholar Mangkoenegoro has written: "What is finer or more ennobling than to share in the deep longing of the hero for a final answer to the problem of his origin ... who has no rest until he finds it ... This longing for knowledge of his origin is identical with the longing to understand the final purpose of his destiny. It is from this situation that the two-fold concept *sangkan-paran*, 'whence and whither', derives."[15] The final goal of the quest of the various characters in these short stories lies within their own heart. Once they discover who they really are, they unite with God and vanish forever.

Danarto's work changed the whole path of Indonesian literature, moving it completely away from the conventions which both Indonesian and European readers have been comfortable. The dean of translators of Indonesian literature wrote in the American literary magazine, *The Denver Quarterly*, that:

> Danarto opens a completely new path in Indonesian literature. He makes, and re-makes his world: it is an inside-out presentation, a projection moulded out of interior concerns. And yet it is also dramatic, the stories move and even leap, and we are moved when they are done. More than moved: we are sometimes shaken, even trembling, so forcefully has Danarto impinged on us, with his singular, perhaps not quite sane perception.
>
> In the history of Indonesian literature, Danarto's work marks a great step.
>
> All bets are off now, all linkages are irrelevant. From this point on, it must be recognised that Indonesian fiction stands wholly and proudly on its own two feet.[16]

This prediction has proven absolutely true over the past two decades. Danarto has charged the complete direction of Indonesian writing. We cannot see that literature, and the nation itself, unless we also use the eye with which he provides us.

A final comment is perhaps appropriate here. The eyes of Pramoedya and Danarto are men's eyes. The eyes of Indonesian women are to be found in the newest writing, that of Ayu Utami, Dewi Lestari and Dorothea Rosa Herliany. The richness of the Indonesian vision continues to expand and to challenge the reader who would truly know this country and its culture.

Harry Aveling

NotEs tO tHe iNTrodUctiOn

[1] A. Teeuw: *Modern Indonesian Literature*, Nijhoff, The Hague 1967, p.179.

[2] A. H. Johns: "Pramudya Ananta Tur: The Writer as Outsider", *Meanjin*, 1963, part 2, p. 354.

[3] Trans. C. W. Watson: "It's Not an All Night Carnival",*Indonesia*, No.14, April 1973.

[4] Trans. Harry Aveling: *The Fugitive*, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), Hong Kong 1975.

[5] Trans. Harry Aveling: *A Heap of Ashes*, Univesity of Queensland Press, St Lucia 1975.

[6] "*This Earth of Mankind, Child of All Nations, Footsteps,* and *House of Glass.* On these translations see Alison Bronoiwski: "Desperately Appreciating Pramoedya", *Island*, Summer 1992, pp. 40-42.

[7] Willem Samels: *The Mutes Soliloquy*, Hyperion Press, New York 1999.

[8] Ed. B. R. O'G Anderson et al: *Stories from Jakarta*, Modern Indonesian Studies Program, Cornell University, Ithaca N.Y. 1999. Republished by Equinox Publishers, Jakarta 2000.

[9] F. Jameson: "Third-world literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", first published in *Social Text*, no, 15, 1986, pp. 87-95. Reprinted in (ed.) M. Hardt and K. Weeks: *The Jameson Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 2000, pp. 315-339. The quotation is from page 320 of the latter edition.

[10] "Hadiah Horison 1996/1967 dan 1968", *Horison*, April 1969, p.102.

[11] "Bahasa sebagai alat pengucapan kesusasteraan", *Horison*, May-June 1973, p. 176

[12] "Kronik Kebudayaan", *Horison*, January 1973, p. 30.

[13] "Penulis Ceritapendek", *Sinar Harapan*, 25 September 1975.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Cited in A. H. Johns: *The Gift Addressed to the Spirit of the Prophet*, Oriental Monograph Series No. 1, Centre of Oriental Studies, Australian National University, Canberra, no date, pp. 19-20.

[16] Introduction to "Abracadabra", *Denver Quarterly*, Spring 1977, p.131.

acKNowLeDgeMenT

ABRACADABRA was first published by Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), Hong Kong, in 1978. The Introduction to the present volume is a reworked version of the original introduction and includes parts of an article entitled "Desperately Translating Pramoedya", *New Straits Times*, 19 May 2001.

AutObioGRaphy

FINALLY, a young man, who had taught himself, so he could understand everything around him, stopped editing children's magazines forever. As a child he had not been very clever, he was weak in arithmetic, but had some skill in drawing, and this perhaps brought him closer to his playmates, because he was a very shy person, his family were ordinary people, labourers in a sugar factory—it still excited him to think of the times he and his friends had stolen sugarcane from the carts drawn by pairs of cows, of dancing conga-lines and singing "God is nearer than the veins of our necks." How far he had to go, how many memories had to be expunged before he could begin life again, he had already had twenty years to understand everything, half of that had been passed in ebb and flow, was even topsy-turvy, was meaningless, this was very important, it taught him a lesson, he could and must dominate himself, because the goal of all things is "work", so he never moved very far away from actual reality and necessity.

When he was a child he saw, during the colonial period, an excessive amount of cruelty and blood, guerrillas were tortured and killed in the room next to his bedroom, his own short stories startle him when he reads them, there is one shadow he can never escape: his stories always stink of blood. This may be an expression of his own immaturity or an accurate picture of the age. Certainly he writes because that was how things were.

He often sees his childhood when he returns to his village, scene of cruelty.

He is bound to his past.

Once, when he was a baby, he felt that he could feel nothing, perhaps he was 'dead', he could see his mother crying and his father frowning, of course they both thought